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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS ON MOSQUES, HAMAS,
AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Minister of Religious Affairs Mahmud al Habbash outlined progress in the Palestinian Authority (PA) government's campaign against mosque incitement in a July 16 meeting. Compliance with mandatory PA sermons in the West Bank's 1,800 mosques is now over ninety percent, he claimed. The PA is now focused on removing problematic staff and training a new generation of clergy in its religious schools. Al Habbash claimed politicization of Hamas mosques has led some Gazans to shift to independent mosques instead, and he raised concerns over Israeli National Police (INP) actions at the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif. End Summary.

Compliance With Mandatory Sermons "Over Ninety Percent"

¶2. (SBU) In a July 16 meeting with Polchief, al Habbash described the ongoing PA campaign against incitement in mosques. He said the situation in the West Bank's 1,800 mosques has improved dramatically in recent months as a government campaign to monitor Friday sermons takes hold. "Every mosque belongs to the state in theory," he said, "but we didn't really control any of them before." The first step in the PA's effort was to distribute a document containing "key points" for Friday sermons to all West Bank mosques, he said. The document also prohibits incitement or criticism of the PA. An investigative division under the ministry prepares a twice-monthly compliance report based on feedback from government employees and the security services. Compliance rates have risen from around twenty percent at the inception of the program to over ninety percent today, he claimed.

Next Steps: Firings, Training New Generation

¶3. (SBU) Al Habbash said that, despite this success, some employees have refused to accept the PA's policy of separating politics from the mosques. "There is a clear difference between those who serve religion and those who use it for political purposes," he said, adding, "you can see clearly who is obeying and who is not." For that reason, al Habbash said, the ministry recently initiated a second stage in the campaign focused on forcibly retiring problematic mosque staff.

¶4. (SBU) The third stage in the PA campaign against incitement is to revamp the religious education system, al Habbash said. "Some of what children learn comes from inside the mosques," he noted, "but (training in) the Qu'ran and the Hadith outside of schools is very important. It is here they learn Hamas equals religion, Fatah are pagans, and the U.S. is evil." In order to address the situation, he said, the PA had reformed the eight religious schools under the ministry. "Soon we will have trained 400 new imams who are loyal to the

PA, who teach religion (and not factional) politics," he said.

----- Hamas Mosques Losing Some of Their Followers? -----

15. (SBU) In response to a question on the situation in the Gaza mosques, al Habbash said "ninety percent" remain under Hamas' control, with the remainder divided among Salafists, Sufis, and radical groups such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Al Habbash, who once ran the Islamic Dawa in Gaza before he left Hamas in 1994, said the politicized message in Hamas-run mosques had alienated some Gazans. Consequently, attendance at independent mosques is on the rise, he claimed.

----- INP Actions at the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif -----

16. (SBU) Finally, al Habbash expressed concern over INP actions at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. He claimed the INP had prevented "necessary" repairs at the site and cited cases of mistreatment of female worshippers. Although he acknowledged his ministry has no direct authority in the matter, he said he travels to Jerusalem frequently and remains in touch with the Office of the Awqaf there. He said the situation had worsened since PM Netanyahu came into office and could "ignite" if not addressed.

WALLES